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ABSTRACT

The role and activities of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) Task Force on Excellence are identified. Functions of the Task Force are to assist AASCU members in: (1) evaluating and improving teacher preparation programs; (2) reviewing and evaluating recommendations contained in recent studies dealing with America's school system; (3) identifying issues that might be of particular concern to AASCU institutions and their constituents; (4) developing teaching/learning strategies designed to achieve excellence in education, in partnership with other public schools and institutions; (5) disseminating information on reforms to the public and to special audiences; (6) working with state officials and national agencies to form policies within states that will promote educational excellence; (7) assessing the effectiveness of educational reforms through periodic AASCU-sponsored regional and national conferences; and (8) co-sponsoring programs designed to assure continued access to educational opportunity for the disadvantaged. Activities projected for the Task Force concern preparation of policy statements, technical assistance to member colleges, and promoting collaboration among colleges, schools, and agencies. The 1983-1984 Task Force action plan is included. (SW)

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AASCU and the Nation's Schools:

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AASCU AND THE NATION'S SCHOOLS:
An Action Program for Excellence and Opportunity in Education

The following statement was developed by the AASCU Task Force on Excellence in Education and approved by the membership on November 22, 1983.

Introduction

From America's beginning, its citizens recognized that education would undergird the nation's entire social and intellectual infrastructure. On July 13, 1787—nearly two centuries ago—Article Three of the Northwest Ordinance framed the concept unequivocally:

"Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

That enduring commitment nurtured the creation of local and state systems of public schools and colleges designed to assure all Americans an opportunity for productive learning—an idea, at once pragmatic and idealistic, as central to this country's pre-eminence in the world as its farms, industries, and natural resources.

Over the decades, maintenance of the quality and integrity of the nation's educational enterprise has depended primarily on the talents and capabilities of members of the teaching profession. In turn, their competence, skill, and dedication derive in no small measure both from the character of the colleges and universities where they themselves study to become teachers and from the caliber of the academic programs in which they enroll.

In the United States today, over fifty percent of all new school teachers certified each year are trained in the 356 institutions that comprise the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. The fortunes of the nation's schools and AASCU have been linked from the days of the "normal school," through the era of the "teachers college," to modern times and the emergence of multi-purpose regional state colleges and universities.

To this day, the goals of AASCU institutions remain compatible with those of the public schools and, in fact, with the goals of our society at large: to foster a liberally educated citizenry that is literate, technologically competent, and morally responsible.

AASCU institutions pioneered in expanding educational opportunities for immigrants, minorities, and working class families. Generation after generation of graduates of AASCU members have enhanced and enriched the teaching profession. As alumni of "the colleges of the forgotten Americans," they have touched the lives of children in virtually every school district in the land.

Thus, for the countless remarkable educational attainments the nation has achieved through the years, AASCU members should be entitled to a considerable degree of credit. Conversely, AASCU institutions should always stand prepared to shoulder a fair share of responsibility for identifying and eliminating deficiencies in America's school system.

Such a challenge is now at hand.

AASCU's Task Force on Excellence

Within recent months, an unprecedented cascade of commission reports, task force studies, research projects, media features, and statements by public leaders has riveted America's attention on the critical condition of its school system.

"Our Nation is at risk," says the National Commission on Excellence in Education. "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

"A real emergency is upon us," states the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth in a report sponsored by the Education Commission of the States.

"American schools are in trouble" is the conclusion of an eight-year study conducted by the former dean of the UCLA Graduate School of Education. "In fact, the problems of schooling are of such crippling proportions that

many schools may not survive. It is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse."

While the crisis in education is national in scope and will require national attention, it must be dealt with, first of all, at the local and state levels. All of the recently issued studies and reports emphasize that, historically, public policy decisions affecting the schools are the province of local boards and state agencies. A strategy for educational reform recognizing that fact will require collaborative efforts by governors, mayors, state legislators, chief state school officers, school board members and administrators, teachers and teacher organizations, parents, students and representatives of trade unions, businesses, industries, postsecondary institutions, and the other professions.

To accomplish the educational reforms that are deemed imperative will require hard work, diligence, patience, a rethinking of academic and educational priorities, professional commitment—and time. Many of the issues with which educators are expected to cope in the schools are rooted in much larger problems facing society itself. A societal crisis that has evolved over several decades cannot be resolved in a matter of months, or even within a few years.

AASCU's member institutions are committed to helping their states and communities strengthen the school systems that are so central to the achievement of excellence in all aspects of American life: in the classroom, in the work place, in the greater society. No segment of higher education faces a more difficult challenge. In light of this commitment and the present critical juncture in the history of American education, the AASCU Board of Directors established the AASCU Task Force on Excellence in Education on May 1, 1983.

The functions of the Task Force are to assist AASCU members in:

1. Examining the character of teacher preparation programs and developing alternatives for their improvement.
2. Reviewing and evaluating recommendations contained in the recent studies dealing with America's school system.

3. Identifying issues that might be of particular concern to AASCU institutions and their constituents.
4. Developing–in partnership with other public schools and other institutions–teaching/learning strategies designed to achieve excellence in education.
5. Disseminating information to the general public, as well as to special audiences (e.g., state legislatures and school boards), describing cooperative efforts being made to assure those reforms that are necessary in the educational system.
6. Working with state officials and national agencies, such as the Education Commission of the States, to establish policies within the states that are conducive to the attainment of educational excellence.
7. Assessing the effectiveness of educational reforms through periodic AASCU-sponsored regional and national conferences.
8. Co-sponsoring programs designed to assure continued access to educational opportunity for disadvantaged populations.

Among the activities projected for the work of the Task Force are the following:

A. Preparation of one or more policy statements for consideration and possible endorsement by the 356 AASCU member institutions which would address these issues:

   - Expectations of colleges and universities regarding the public school curriculum and the educational standards needed for achievement in college; and, conversely, the expectations of school systems with respect to the preparation of teachers.
   - Educational competencies needed for success in a knowledge-based society.
   - Appropriate personal and social values needed to reinforce the importance of excellence in education.

B. Provision of a support system and technical assistance to aid member colleges and universities engaged in institution-wide efforts to:

   - Improve the quality of students who are preparing to be teachers.

- Identify able students and encourage them to select teaching as a profession.
- Expand and improve professional development programs for practicing teachers and educational administrators.
- Evaluate the various curricula and courses taken by students who are preparing to be teachers.

C. Stimulation of collaborative efforts between higher education institutions, school systems, governmental agencies, and private sector organizations in the promotion of educational reforms designed to meet specific state and local needs, such as:

- Possible changes in teacher certification requirements.
- The development of norms for college graduates planning to enter the teaching profession.

AASCU's Pivotal Leadership Role

On being informed that the AASCU Task Force on Excellence in Education had been created, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell expressed the hope that it would pay special attention to high school students and to the education of teachers.

"If your Association could issue an advisory-type statement endorsing a more rigorous high school curriculum," he wrote, "it would have a powerful influence. Additionally, schools of education need much attention and upgrading. We need some new ideas that will produce the teacher-scholars that our elementary and secondary schools so desperately need today."

For well over a century prior to AASCU's establishment as a national organization in 1961, many of the institutions that now comprise its membership had made the preparation of teachers the centerpiece of their academic programs. In recent years, however, as AASCU institutions have become more comprehensive in scope, their role as regional state colleges and universities has broadened throughout the country. In addition, the entire post-secondary educational landscape has grown more intricate, social values have changed markedly, the national

economy is more complex, and technology has revolutionized the way Americans live, work, and learn.

As a result, there has been a dramatic shift in institutional program priorities, with colleges that had been predominantly teacher education institutions greatly expanding their offerings to other careers. Also, a variety of factors, including the development of new opportunities for women and expansion of the job market in business, engineering, allied health fields, and other professions, have resulted in the loss of many highly capable students from the teaching profession.

The AASCU Task Force on Excellence in Education believes that the governing boards, administrative officers, and faculties of AASCU institutions have an overriding responsibility to reevaluate and revitalize programs for the preparation of teachers, with an eye to the 21st century. Educating men and women to become teachers is an on-going, dynamic process and it is clearly in the national interest that top priority be given to the recruitment of talented students into the profession. Their retention in a school system that assures quality at every level and in all fields of instruction would gain for teachers a prestige appropriate to their responsibilities.

In accepting this responsibility, the AASCU leadership community will be playing a pivotal role in today's nationwide movement to secure excellence in America's schools and add greater diginity to the teaching profession. AASCU members face no more urgent imperative in the years immediately ahead.

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Allan W. Ostar
President

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